



You Can't Check Email. ('Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times' and 'From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century')

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Piper, Andrew. *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times*. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Lang, Anouk, ed. *From Codex to Hypertext : Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.

Do books have a future? As long ago as 1996, Geoffrey Nunberg compared the media theorist speculating on space-age reading devices to “some Eocene race-track tout trying to call the winners of future Kentucky Derbies on the basis of observations about the herd of eohippi grazing about his knees” (*The Future of the Book* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996], 11). Few were deterred. The intervening decades have generated a welter of magazine articles, white papers, blog posts, and books – whether electronic or printed – debating print’s foothold within an increasingly crowded and volatile media ecology. Should we worry that images increasingly compete with text, or rejoice in the ubiquity of alphabetic characters on Twitter? Was the news this August that Amazon.co.uk was selling more e-books than printed volumes cause for hope or despair? (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/readers-are-now-buying-more-ebooks-than-printed-books-8008827.html>) Will books go the way of candles and horseshoes – knickknacks collected by antiquarians? Is the end of print synonymous with the end of reading, perhaps even of civilization?

Andrew Piper’s *Book Was There* turns a mirror on this moving target. Let others crash book club meetings (Joan Bessman Taylor’s gambit in one chapter of *From Codex to Hypertext*), analyze bookshop layouts (Julie Rak’s in another), diagram Amazon.com recommendations (Ed Finn’s) quiz prisoners about their taste in fiction (Megan Sweeney’s), or lurk on Chinese websites devoted to amateur-authored time-travel-themed romance novels (Jin Feng’s). Piper takes a more personal tack. Lyrical where those studies are data-driven, organized by theme rather than chronology, *Book Was There* eschews system in favor of a series of first-person essays on self-consciously quirky topics (touch, faces, trees, numbers). The Piper progeny make occasional walk-ons, juxtaposed with their father’s own childhood memories. When he misbehaved, the author was sent to his room to read; his own children are punished instead by having their books impounded. Piper acknowledges that neither method is likely to meet with the approval of published experts. Although he doesn’t belabor the point, it’s worth remembering that books are not only pawns in each generation’s struggles to control the other’s time (the child who hides a flashlight under the covers can also tug at a reading parent’s sleeve); they also script our daily lives. The books under siege, Piper’s anecdote slyly implies, aren’t necessarily *Great Expectations*; equally threatened are print editions of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.

Piper’s use of the first person casts *Book Was There* as a cross between an academic monograph and the general-audience genre that Seth Lerer has christened “autobibliography.” As interested in the narrator’s readings as in his doings, those namedropping memoirs characteristically open with a lonely and precocious child, unappreciated by the coarser souls who surround him. (The author’s first memory is typically a printed page; his second, resisting his mother’s injunction to go outside and play with the other children.) It’s refreshing, in this context, that Piper remembers himself as something closer to an Everychild, significant less as a

prodigy than as an representative specimen of the first generation to grow up with video games (the digital equivalent to incunabulae?).

Those autobiographical ruminations are enlisted in often arresting analogies between the old and the new. Who else would have realized that digital reading reinvents the eyestrain familiar to the age of candlelight, or that scarcity of copies made early computer labs akin to the scriptoria of medieval monasteries (loc 1478)? Extremes meet as well, Piper points out, in discourses about old and new media: 21st-century diatribes against screens look uncannily similar to seventeenth-century denunciations of mass-produced romances.

Piper's day job is literary theory, and poststructuralist tics may scare off readers not yet inured to sentences such as "it also articulates a sense of difference beyond itself in relation to the typographic." But those who persevere will be rewarded, because Book was There veers far beyond literature proper, patching together research by historians, bibliographers and media theorists into a surprisingly seamless synthesis with glimpses of original research thrown in for good measure. What saves those disparate fields from pulling apart is their shared interest in two traditionally overlooked aspects of reading, embodiment and sociability. Embodiment, because reading is the work of the eyes and the hands, not just the brain. And sociability, because, in Piper's words, "we want other people to read the same thing we are reading ...; We want to be able to send other people what we are reading...; and we want to be able to talk to other people about what we are reading" (loc 1300). Commercial interests stand in the way, however: the digital rights management techniques that enforce increasingly stringent copyright laws now subject readers to the same "licensing" (i.e., censorship) once directed at publishers. In the process, consumers replace producers as the target of state surveillance (loc 1537). Instead of buying books, we rent access to them: remember Amazon's deletion of a student's notes on his digital copy of 1984. And that access is conditional not just on paying, but on accepting "terms of use" whose fine print includes permission to monitor our activities. The corporations that sell us reading matter are also selling third-party advertisers access to us (loc 1536).

Publishers, in short, are reading over your shoulder. And far from resisting, ordinary readers are volunteering information about their taste to an interested or indifferent public – whether through user reviews on retail sites such as Amazon, "likes" on for-profit social networks such as Facebook, or posts on non-profit websites such as LibraryThing. This last – a vast collective catalog – offers a virtual equivalent to the experience of scanning the bookshelves in your friends' living rooms, baring each user's soul (or at least his bibliography) to strangers. Julian Pinder's analysis of LibraryThing in *From Codex to Hypertext* casts social media as a means for discussing and recommending books. David Wright's chapter on "list culture," too, focuses on recommendations of book-length reading material, usually novels. Yet just as lists themselves are made to be read, social media are more than a vector for books: every Facebook user who scans another's timeline is engaged in reading. The subtitle "reading at the turn of the 21st century" belies contributors' disproportionate interest in a particular subset of that topic, the reading of long-form texts (whether classic or forgettable) in recognizably literary genres. Piper, more catholic in his scope, points out that one videogame includes over 1 million words (loc 2099).

Is the competitor to p-books e-books or gaming? The infinitesimal proportion of reading matter that has ever been literary – Gutenberg himself was a jobbing printer – makes it dangerous to confuse the future of reading with the future of literature. Pinder counters Harold Bloom's declaration that "real reading is a lonely activity and does not teach anyone to become a better citizen" by pointing out that LibraryThing inculcates a set of ethical norms about how to contribute to online communities (p. 82). Where early-twenty-first-century commentators saw the Web as a source of information that would produce better citizens – you read the news online before heading offline to vote or agitate – Pinder's logic is more recursive: the community whose civic discourse LibraryThing underpins is ... LibraryThing. It's surprising, in that context, that he analyzes LibraryThing as a means to the end of reading books, not as reading matter its own right.

The prepositions structuring the title *From Codex to Hypertext* imply that the latter will supersede the former. The longer history of media suggests that new technologies don't necessarily displace older ones: for the moment, printed books continue to coexist with online text as comfortably as radio with television. In fact, the age of ubiquitous screens has seen a renaissance of audio genres such as the podcast. When it comes to technology, sometimes less is more. A cheap old Kindle (or secondhand paperback) is more absorbing than the latest iPad, because you can't check email.

As libraries continue to de-accession printed books, however, ink on paper feels increasingly vulnerable. Piper points out how many conceptual artists are cutting, drowning, soaking, and piercing books, or even riddling them with bullets (loc 2282). Do these stunts reflect a melancholy inherent to reading, as Piper claims in characteristically wistful prose, or dramatize print's current decline? If the book is dying, we can at least take comfort in the inventiveness of its eulogizers.